



Illinois Department of Natural Resources

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IDNR Interagency Wildland Fire Crew Assists Firefight in Montana

SPRINGFIELD, IL – The Illinois Wildland Fire Crew, sponsored by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), assisted with wildland firefighting efforts during a recent two-week deployment, battling the Wild 7 fire in Montana.

The Illinois crew on Aug. 2, at the request from the National Interagency Fire Center, joined four other Eastern Region 20-person crews from Missouri, Iowa, Indiana, and Tennessee deployed to Missoula, Montana for dispatch to several large fires in the region, which had been affected by high temperatures, dry fuels, and lightning.

The Illinois crew was sent to the Wild 7 fire inside the 1.1 million-acre Charles M. Russell Wildlife Refuge in northeast Montana. The refuge is well known for its species of concern, including the largest population big horn sheep outside the Rocky Mountains, as well as grizzly bears, rattlesnakes, prairie elk, cougars, and burrowing owls. The refuge also features critical habitats which support sage and roughed grouse. Additionally, the refuge is on the trail of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (Corps of Discovery) in the early 19th century.

At the Wild 7 fire, Illinois crew members put out hot spots, dropped burning trees, reinforced the fire line, and cold trailed the fire's edge. While the Illinois crew was on site, the fire took several runs on windy days and burned through the refuge's timbered valleys for a total of about 150 acres. Lightning was determined to be the cause.

When the Wild 7 fire was out three days later, the Illinois crew was ordered to the Lolo National Forest near Missoula for initial attack/severity duty. From a base at the Nine Mile Ranger Station in Huson, the Illinois crew, along with several engines, spent 10 days using lightning detection technology to monitor for new fire starts, fuel reductions near residential areas, recording fuel loading, and on fire watch at the Stark lookout tower. The crew was required to maintain "fire ready/initial attack status" and had many calls reported, but no fires were located. The Illinois crew (and the four other Eastern Region crews) returned home on Aug. 17.

The IDNR has been training and sponsoring qualified wildland firefighters since 2004, sending personnel to assist other agencies on fires in Illinois, Minnesota, Georgia, Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Nevada, Washington, and Oregon. To be a qualified "red carded" entry-level wildland firefighter, individuals must take specific wildland firefighting courses, pass work-capacity tests annually (3-mile walk with a 45-pound vest in less than 45 minutes), and attend an annual fire refresher course. There are approximately 13,000 red-carded wildland firefighters in the U.S.

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All deployment expenses for the Illinois crew are reimbursed to the IDNR by the U.S. Forest Service through a long standing agreement known as the Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management and Stafford Act Response Agreement.

“The ability to deploy staff to wildland fires in other states has provided the people of Illinois and the IDNR with highly qualified and experienced firefighters,” said Tom Wilson, IDNR State Forester, who is a member of the crew. “Each firefighter involved in deployments is committed to an attitude of excellence. The fire program has added a huge dimension for individual growth through knowledge, morale, confidence, and integrity. We have all worked very hard managing this program and the IDNR fire crews have consistently achieved recognition from our national fire partners. These highly trained crew members, in turn, assist in wildland fire protection and prescribed fire operations here in Illinois.”

Members of the IDNR Interagency Type 2 Initial Attack Crew deployed to Montana in August 2016:

Chris Bickers IDNR Fisheries
Wade Bloemer, IDNR Forestry
Kent Boyles, IDNR Wildlife
Brian Eubanks, IDNR Wildlife
Stefanie Fitzsimons, IDNR Wildlife
Tom Gargrave, IDNR Forestry
Dave Griffith, IDNR Forestry
Rich Lewis, IDNR Realty and Environmental Planning
Jay Massey, IDNR Land Management
John Nelson, IDNR Nature Preserves Commission
Brad Semel, IDNR Natural Heritage
Ben Snyder, IDNR Forestry
Tom Wilson, IDNR Forestry
Phil Cox, IDNR IL Recreational Access Program
Curt Martin, Fox Lake Fire Dept.
Curt Timmer, Freeport Fire Dept.
Alan Obrien, Lake Villa Fire Dept.
Jim Tresouthick, Village of Homewood Forester
Jon Yeater Village of Westmont Forester
Mike Heitzig Great Rivers Land Trust

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